Help me Dynamo, you're my only OAP

Written by dreamkatcha. Any related videos, as always, can be found on my YouTube channel.

None of this would have been possible without the fantastic resources generously provided by immensely talented emulator authors, and communities such as Hall of Light, Lemon Amiga, Lemon 64, World of Spectrum, Moby Games, World of Longplays and Recorded Amiga Games. Thank you for your tireless dedication to preserving the history of gaming.

> "Evil Austen Von Flyswatter has stolen the largest set of diamonds ever. Ousted from retirement Caped Crusader Captain Dynamo hurtles into action. Rescue the diamonds, dodge the booby traps and save the world!"

So says the manual for Codemasters' wonderfully eccentric geriatric platformer, Captain Dynamo. So why then does the box depict Dynamo hurtling down a winding staircase on a zip-wire clutching a swag bag bursting with diamonds while Mad Austen frantically gives chase armed with a pink blancmange gun?

He's already recovered the booty and now the tables have turned. Yeah, *that* would work. Our villainous tea-leaf nemesis is attempting to *re*-steal the *de*-stolen stolen loot.

That's definitely who they're supposed to be, the back of the box confirms it.

You'd never know otherwise. In-game Dynamo looks like Delboy Trotter decked out in his Batman fancy dress costume, with no moustache or pickelhaube in sight. You know, the one from the Only Fools and Horses episode voted the nation's favourite?

Mad Austen doesn't feature at all (in Captain Dynamo I mean), not even in the finale. Well, technically, there *isn't* one. What do you expect for £7.99?

Actually you (and the Amiga magazine critics) may get more than you *bargained* for.

> "Dynamo will undoubtedly appeal to younger players. There are a great many more challenging games out there, they may be a little more expensive but you get what you pay for. Initially, this may be fun but it soon gets boring because of the lack of variety in the graphics and action. Cheap and tacky!"

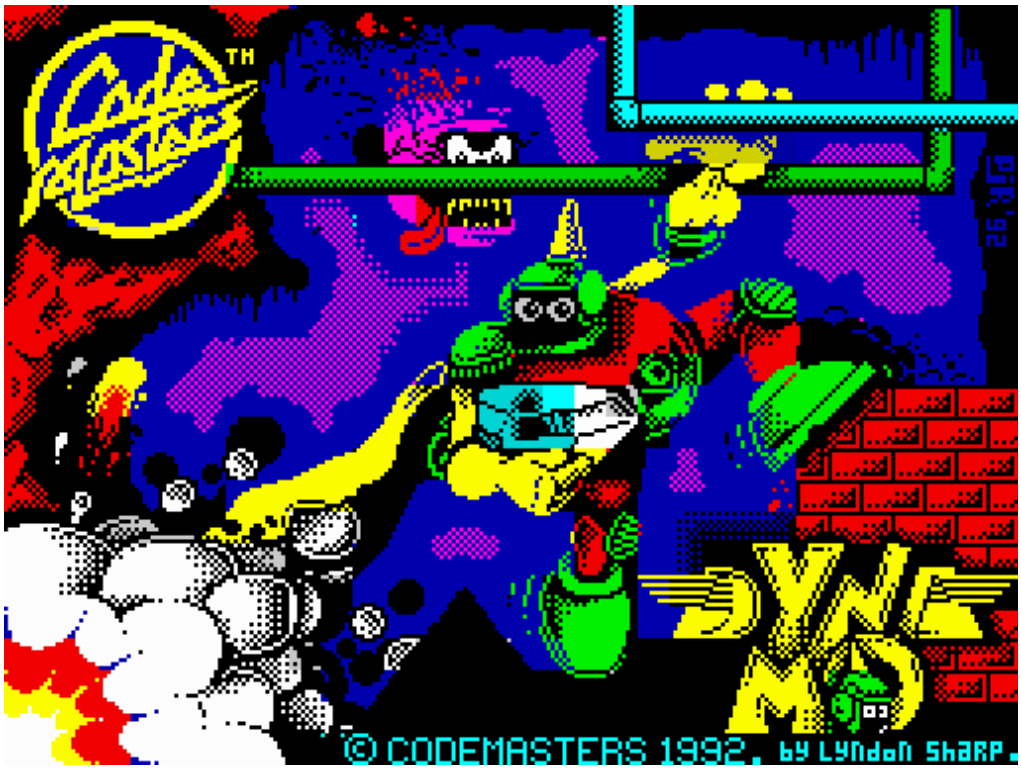
Amiga Power (57%, October 1992)

"Overall Captain Dynamo is a bit of a stonker by Code Masters' standards. It may be like every other platform game, but for a wild and wacky fun platform number, it's worth eight quid of anyone's money."

Atari ST User (80%, November 1992)

Where the presentation and tight, responsive controls are concerned, Captain Dynamo was lavished with more TLC than many *premium* rate games. Even the Spectrum port features an impressive digitised speech sample in the intro (a 3-2-1 countdown launching us into the action).

All of which should allow us to cut it some slack for its predictable gameplay mechanics and not exactly novel premise.



"The failed world dominator, mad scientist and general fruit cake, Austen Von Flyswatter has decided to fund his retirement by stealing the world's largest collection of diamonds. Scattering them around a booby trap infested rocket ship, Flyswatter escapes to his hideout on the moon.

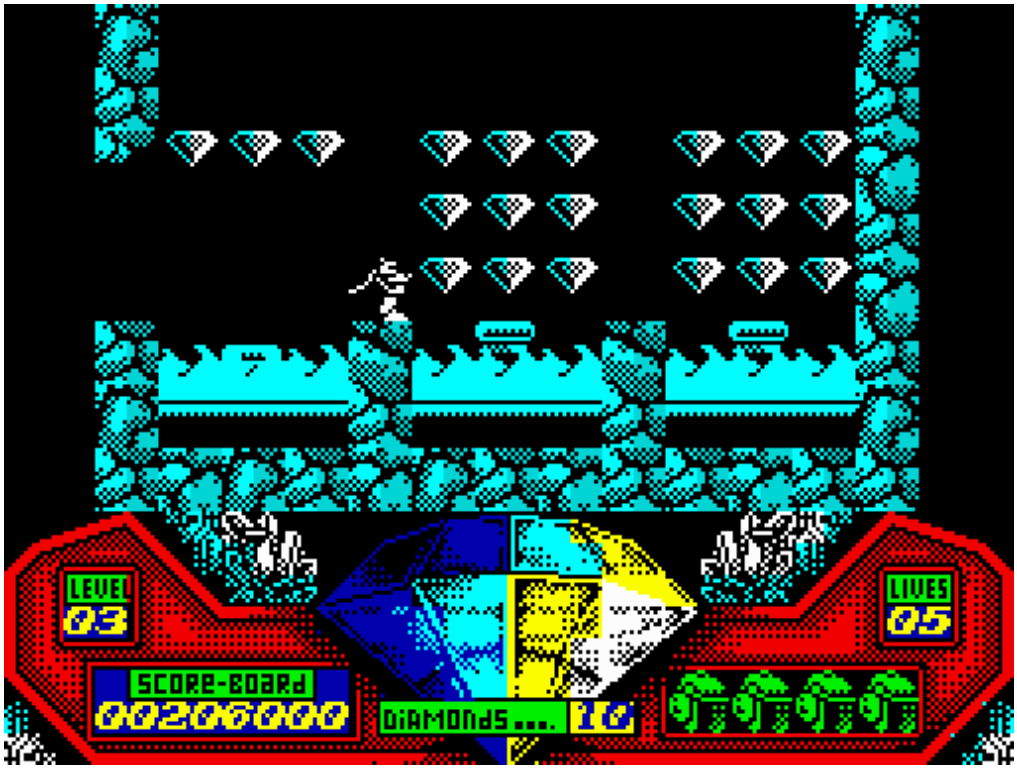
This is a job for Captain Dynamo!!

But the world has not seen sight nor sound of him for the last twenty-five years.

Dynamo has retired to the Happyvale home for Retired Super Heroes where he grows lettuce and other assorted salad crops.

Ousted from his bed by a phone call from the collected world leaders; Pres Bush, John Major, Marge Thatcher and Dave Darling, Dynamo pledges his allegiance to the world as he sets off to retrieve the stolen diamonds.

Go for it, Grandadio!!"



I suspect the developers, Derek Leigh-Gilchrist (coding) and Leigh Christian (graphics) were big Bananaman fans. Their plot, quirky cast (and box art caricatures) definitely share that delicious surrealist cartoon quality. Revelling in nonsense is half the appeal. Not that Eric was a pensioner mind you, that was a fresh angle. How many other OAP game protagonists can you name? Mad Professor Mariarti? Super Gran?

Well, *I* think it stands out. Other opinions are available.

> "It's not very inspired, and using an old person is a gimmick that doesn't amuse for very long. But it's nicely done in the traditional Codies cartoon style, so if your eyes aren't what they were you should be OK with it.
>
> What more can I say? It's got everything you'd expect to see in a (CodeMasters) platform game. It's playable, it's nicely thought out and ultimately you'll have seen something like it before, unless you're an old person and have dementia. (Isn't this all a bit ageist? - Ed.)" **Amiga Format (67%, November 1992)**

Our duty to humankind (and jewellers) is to thwart Mad Austen by scooping up the not so well hidden diamonds from a variety of vertically scrolling landscapes, before reaching the teleport to the next stage at the apex. A bit like Rainbow Islands without the rainbows then. Dynamo has no weapons

at all in fact, which gave its coder the opportunity to assign the fire button to jump, console-style. Instead, our only defence mechanism is the traditional head bounce, making Captain Dynamo a perfect example of pick up and play gaming.

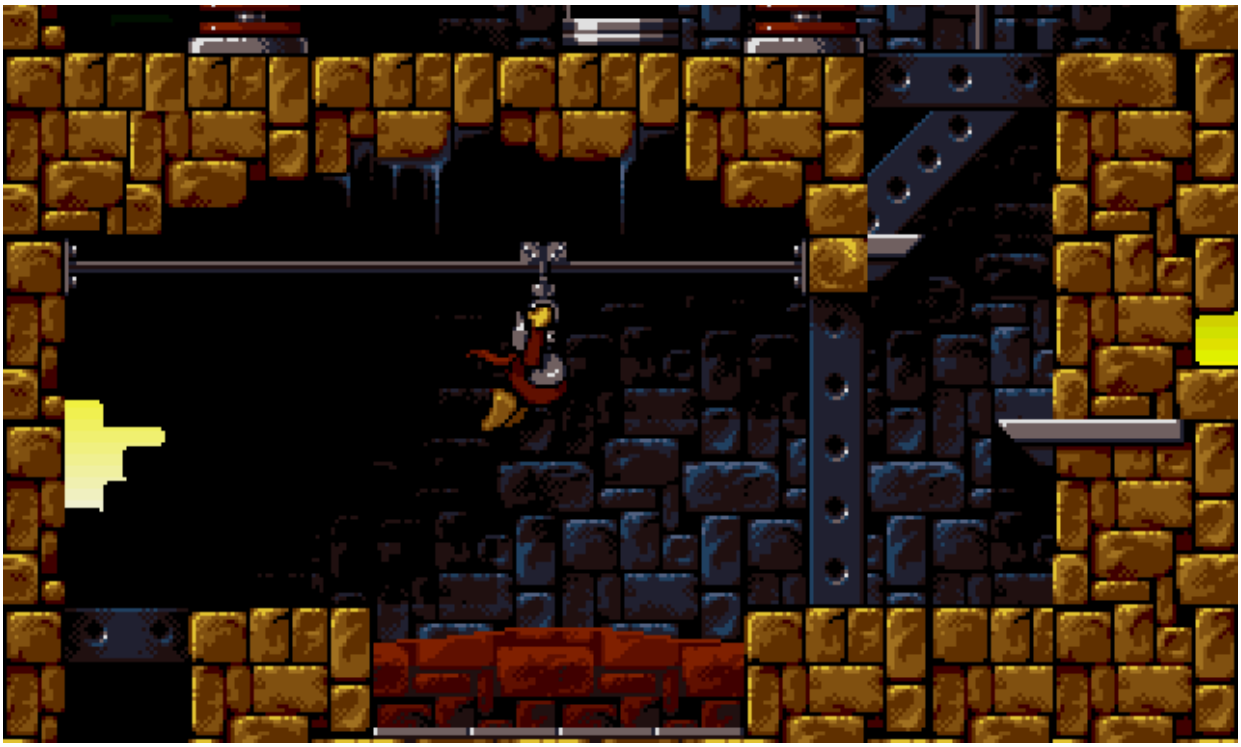
Pinball bouncer springs popularised by Sonic litter our journey, some leading to the safe haven of a higher platform, others propelling us headfirst into ceiling spikes, the bane of poor Superfrog's existence. It's 1992 and we won't be introduced to him for another year so I must be some kind of time-traveller! It's often pot luck which spring-launched outcome we can expect until taking the plunge, seeing as we have no way to look far enough above, even using the high jump (push up whilst hitting fire). Test all the pinball bouncers, memorise the result and you'll know to avoid the same pitfall next time.

Few of us enjoy being skewered like a kebab by lethally sharp objects so it's some consolation that we're able to stand on

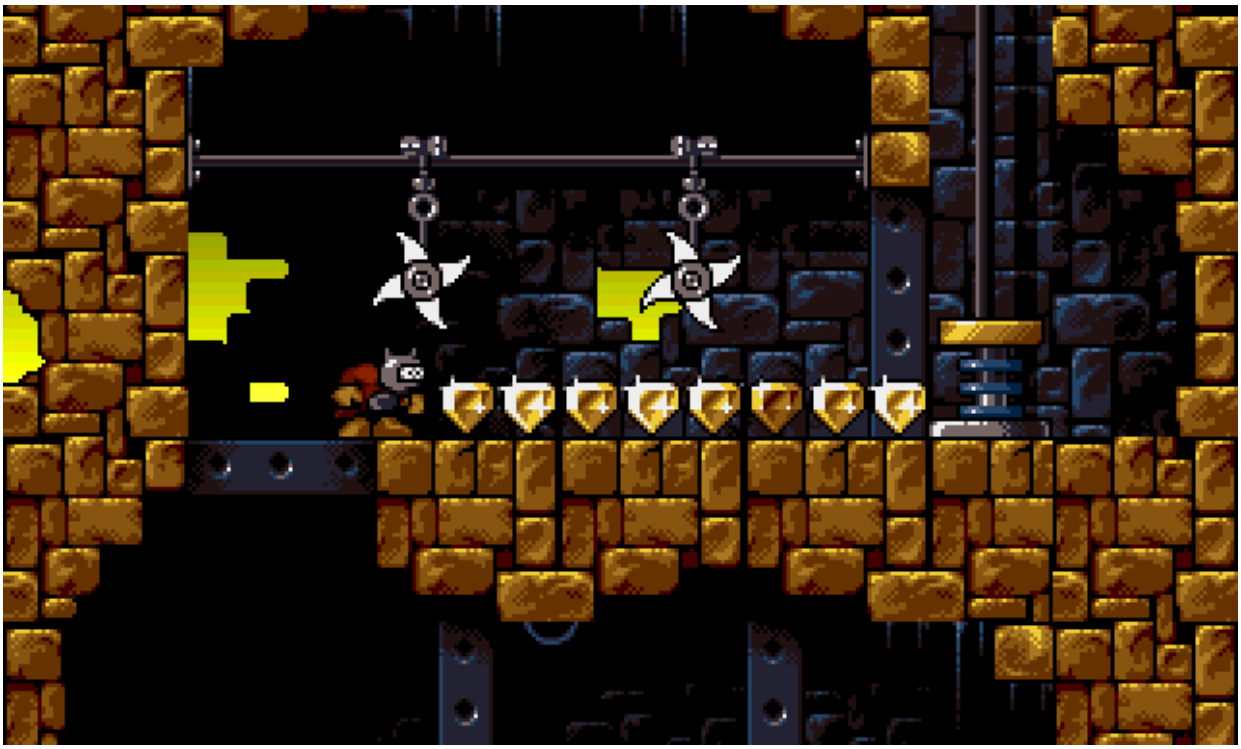
the side of horizontally protruding spikes, or walk into the stalactite/stalagmite style ones without enduring any damage. As it *should* be.

Elsewhere the furniture is more useful. Conveyor belts...

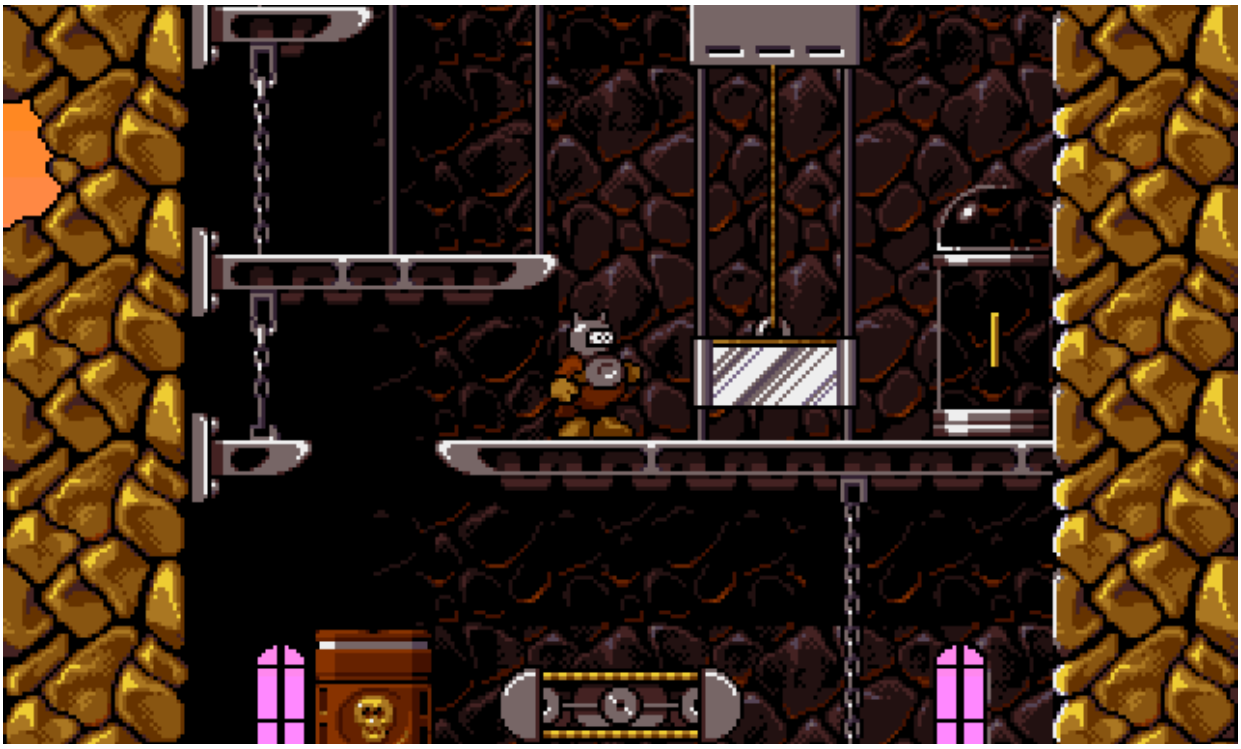
...metal rail pulleys...



...and floating platforms all bring us that bit closer to the pinnacle of the levels where we'll find the exit. That is assuming we can exploit them in navigating around the deadly razor chains...



...guillotines and water tanks.



Further threats patrol the terrain in the form of sentient slinkies, space worms and tortoises so cute you could imagine they began life in an Aardman/Nick Park Creature Comforts stop-motion short and have lost their way making the journey to their next electricity board TV commercial.

With no energy reserves, any collision with a nasty will have the undertaker reaching for their tape measure. Few lives are available off the starting blocks by way of compensation, though extras can occasionally be found along the way... in the form of exquisitely gleaming, golden, spinning Dynamo heads. A static icon would have sufficed, yet as Captain Dynamo is all about going the extra mile we're treated to demo-esque visual trickery. Nice!

Continues aren't factored in, thereby demanding inhuman dexterity, making our punishing mission doubly difficult. Given it's such a short game it made sense to kick our pudgy butt up that steep curve, artificially or otherwise.

It's a worthwhile endurance test, if only to appreciate how much time and effort was channelled into the aesthetics and acoustics from the outset. Captain Dynamo kicks off with a floating image of the hero's disembodied head, dizzyingly mesmerised by a synchronised orbit of demo type, crimson vector balls. A spheroid blanket sweeps towards him, swoops straight through, flips and doubles back to repeat as the manic, crime-caper title tune grabs us by the throat.

Adam Lucas' euphonious barrage ushers in a contrarily plodding platformer to comic effect. Evoking waking nightmares inflicted by Rick Dangerous' neverending death cycles, instead guiding our dawdling protagonist through a more leisurely, spartan romp is welcome relief.

> "Did I mention the sound? No? There's a good reason for that. It's awful. Make sure you play with the volume right down or your pet cat will join in with a chorus of its own."
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> **Amiga Power (57%, October 1992)**
>
> "It's too easy and too slow. With no variety in the graphics and a soundtrack your mother will kill you for playing loud, give it a wide berth."
>
> **Amiga Power (57%, October 1992)**
>
> "The sound isn't up to much - one tune playing incessantly throughout the game and nothing at all in the way of FX are the only reminders that the good Captain hails from Budget City."
>
> **Amiga Computing (76%, December 1992)**

Sound effects being non-existent, the music has a lot of ground to make up. Luckily it delivers, despite the main game being accompanied by only a single track throughout. So too does the audio composed by Matthew Simmonds for the Atari ST interpretation. A few chords seem to mimic The Simpsons theme tune before it launches into something entirely different, all courtesy of the much-heralded YM soundchip.

> "It's been a long while since we've seen a real scorcher of a game from the Codies and if this is anything to go by we're going to have to wait just a bit longer.
>
> Captain Dynamo's graphic artists seem to have run out of ideas after the first level. It looks quite eye-catching at first, with a neat use of shading to create a metallic, dark feel. Unfortunately, that's about it. Moving through the levels turns up no variety in the visuals. It's a pity

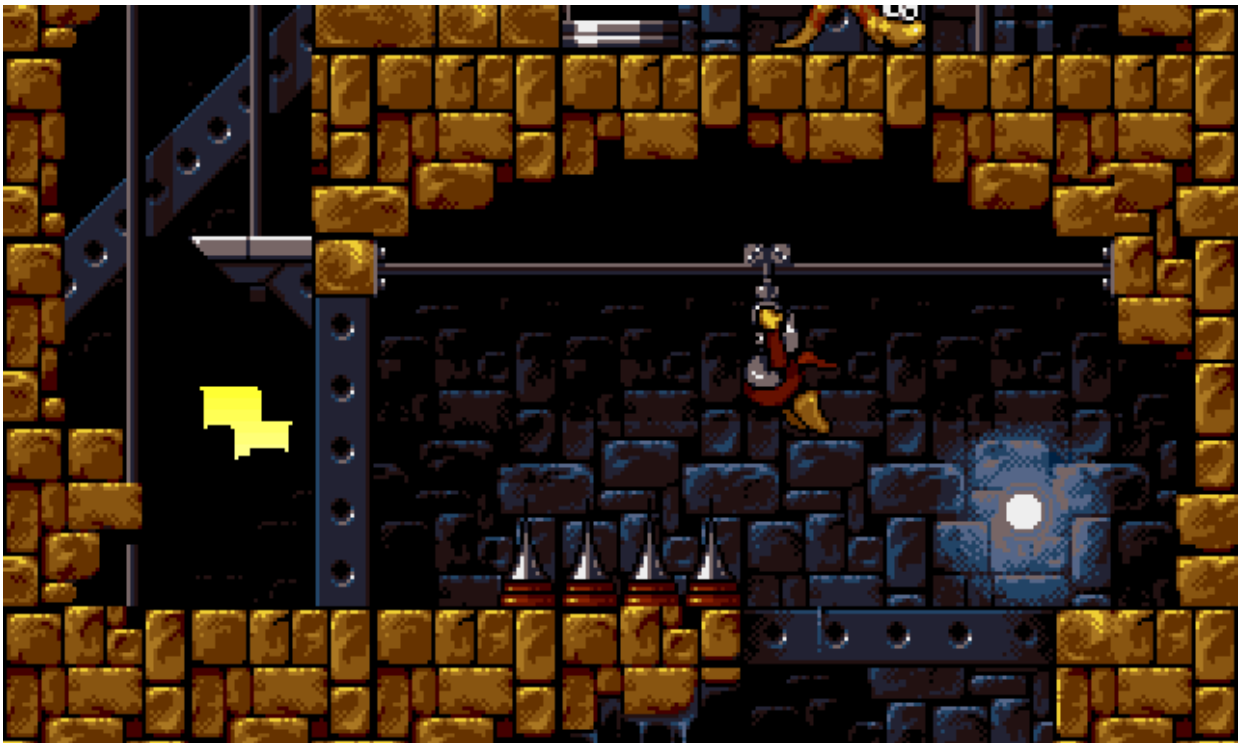
because with a little work they could have really gone to town on the sci-fi thing (well it IS set on the moon)."

Amiga Power (57%, October 1992)

Equally exceptional graphics across all 16-bit variations were the work of Leigh Christian. They perhaps don't receive the recognition they clearly deserve owing to their inclusion in a light-hearted Codemasters budget game, despite rivalling the polish of those seen in similarly styled Team 17 titles. Superfrog springs to mind as its closest analogue.

It's almost a demo in sheep's clothing considering the supreme effort expended to make every minor element shine.

Textured, deceptively non-uniform bricks are partially lit, elsewhere shrouded by shadows. Where light floods in through holes in the back walls it illuminates the surrounding area in diminishing circles.



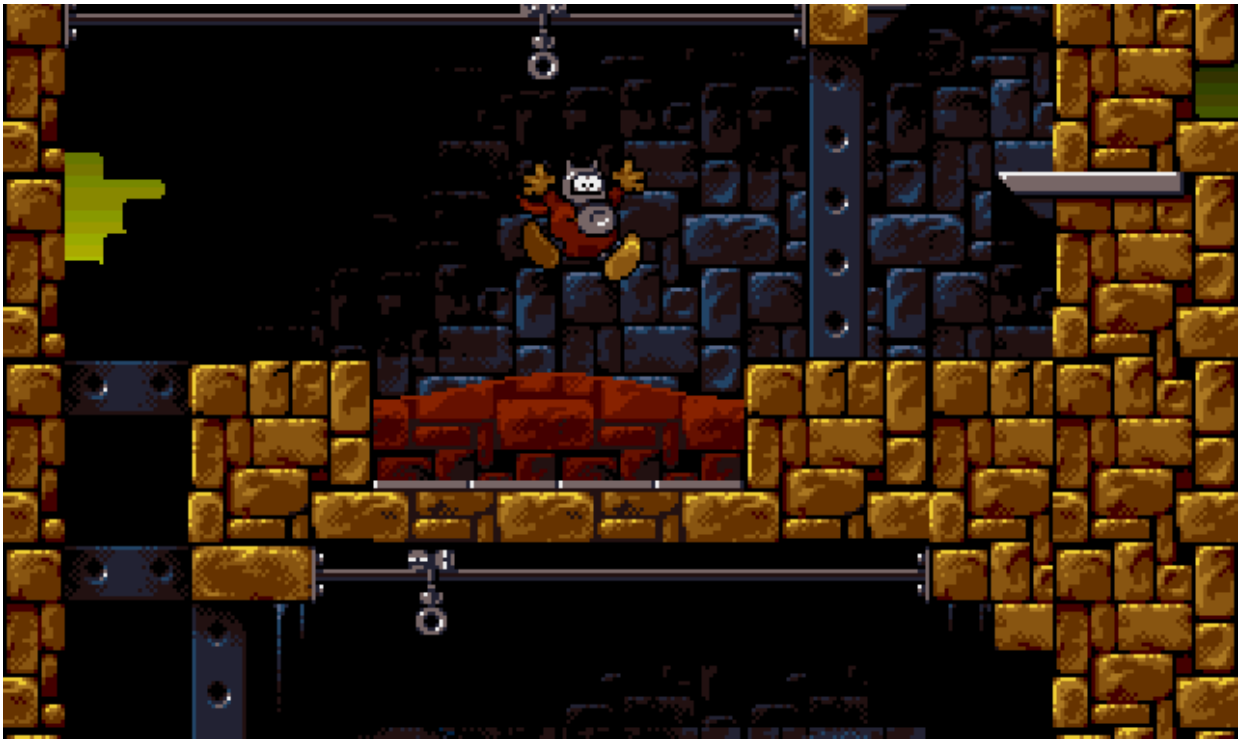
Larger holes in the wall, otherwise known as 'windows', frame the striking, gradient effect sky beyond. Though not in the predominantly interchangeable Atari ST edition. There the gradients are substituted for a simpler, dual-coloured aesthetic.

Another reason you'll want to pay close attention to the walls is that they may lead to secret areas. Attempt to walk through the fake ones and you'll sail straight through to a hidden level warp.

> "Despite the reasonable animation, there is simply not enough happening on screen to make it visually interesting and too few enemy sprites (only three at any one time) for the game to be challenging in the joystick department. Basically, the gameplay becomes too repetitive after a very short while."
>
> **CU Amiga (42%, November 1992)**

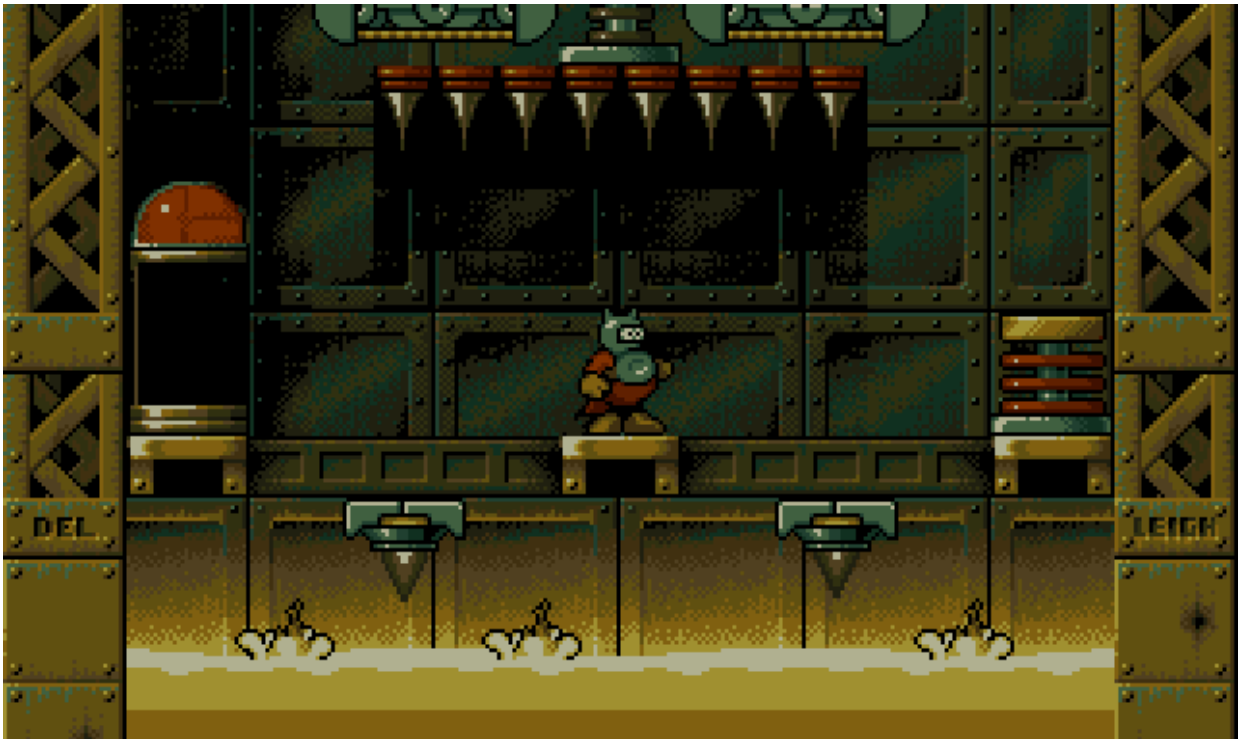
Dynamo's animation is onerously fluid, encompassing far more frames than strictly necessary. His cape flutters gracefully in the wind as he jogs and leaps. Lunging enthusiastically into a jump he leads fist-first as if attempting a Superman take-off that fails to execute... erm, because he can't fly. Fairly crucial to check that first.

Each vault is swung into both feet forward, tucking back in just before landing. Every move comically exaggerated, subtlety not in Dynamo's repertoire. He even dies theatrically - zapped by an electricity bolt Dynamo bounds out of the screen towards the player before slumping out of view.



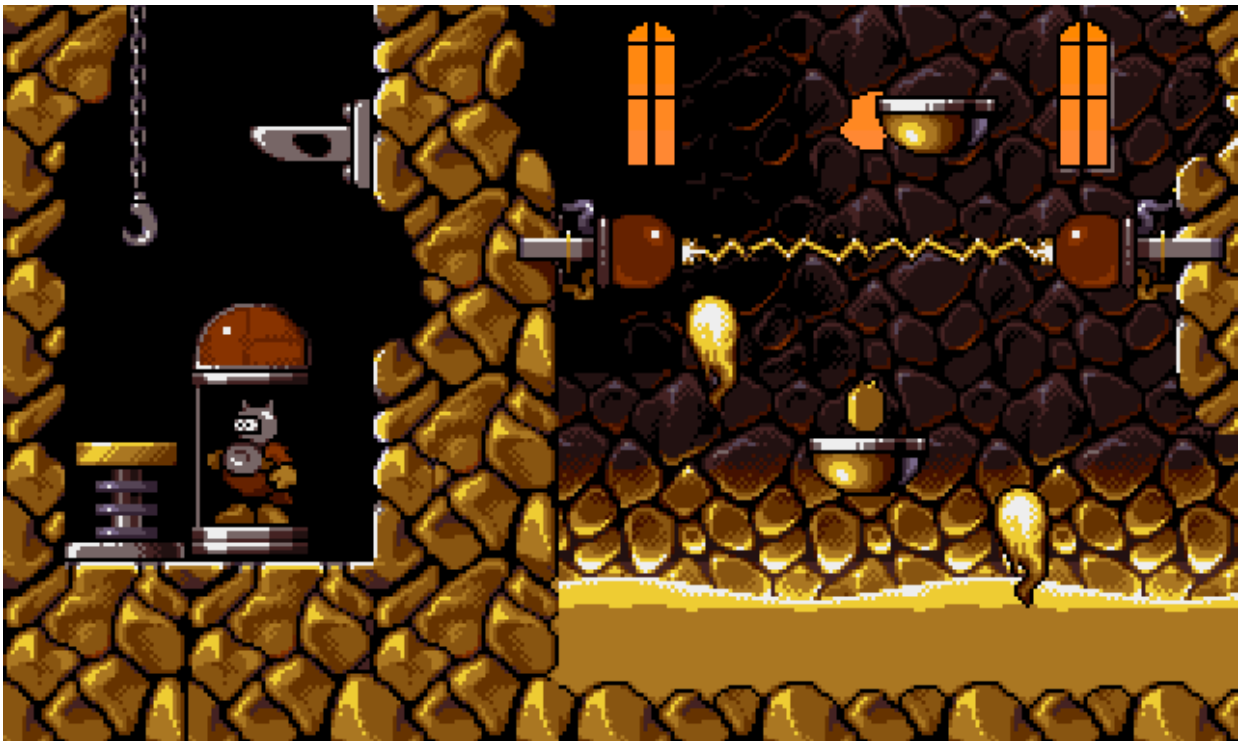
Enemy animation is comparably endearing. Wide-eyed, gormless slinkies cavort back and forth, pause momentarily mid-cycle to blink in bewilderment, before continuing on their way. Space worms arch their backs, flatten, rise again, shuffling convincingly along the platforms. Until we stomp them into oblivion. Aww, I feel guilty now. Oblivious goofy tortoises trundle along starey-eyed, open-mouthed as if they've been experimenting with illegal sweeties.

Another enemy of sorts - the instant death red 'sea' - hasn't been neglected either. Stormy waves undulate, the textures behind partially obscured by liquid transparency effects. Multi-layered molten 'custard' lava found elsewhere showcases the same effect whilst spitting yellow-hot fireballs.



Who wants to play spot the artist's signature?

Teleport booths - where we often find restart point icons rotating 360 degrees on their axis - are denoted by their flashing beacons. These too are characterised by a translucent gloss, revealing distorted textures behind.



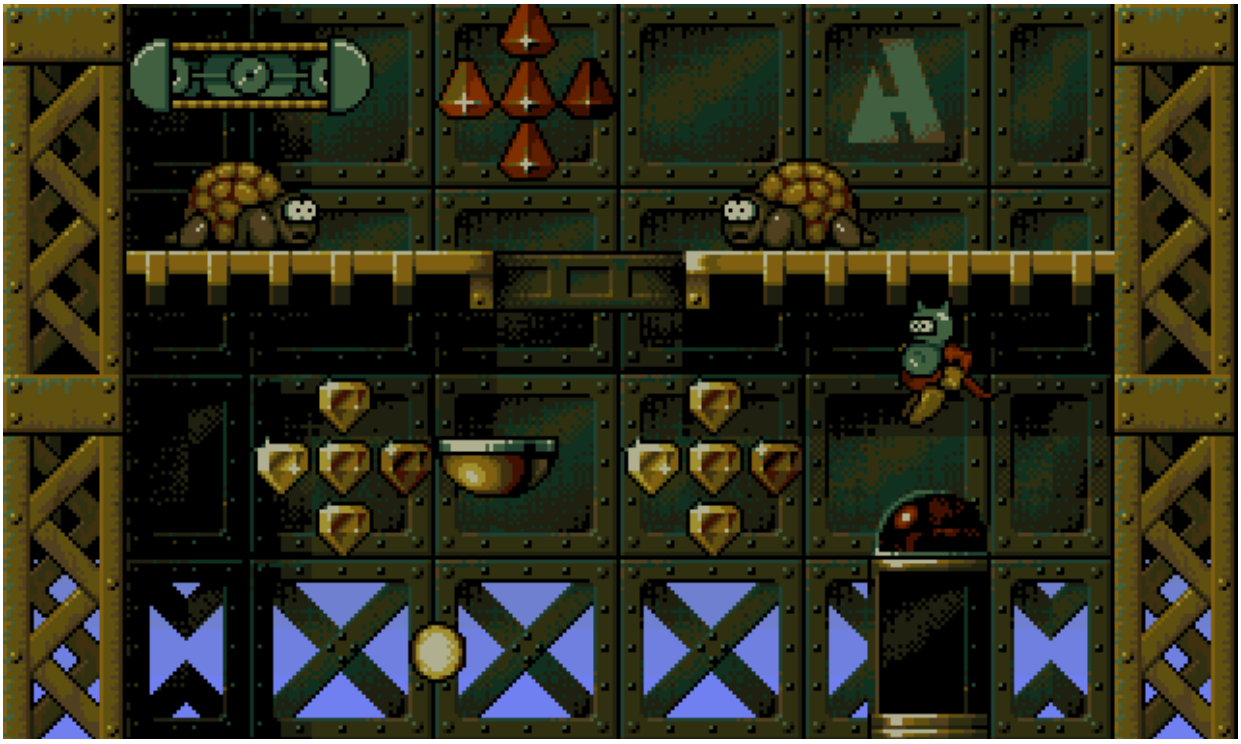
Gemstones, of course, are the main collectables. When recovered these emit twirling 3D point score indicators. Ascending briefly they vanish into the ether, boosting our chances of earning a place in the hall of fame.

Collectable knickknacks would be presented in a single, solid colour in many games. Here they loop through a range of close matches in their respective colour palettes bringing the otherwise inert diamonds to life. Stumble across a row of them and this creates the illusion that they're illuminating and extinguishing back to their neutral state in sequence as in a choreographed light show. To complement the effect they glisten with carefully placed sparkling light flares. It's enough to root Dynamo to the spot, gawping in wonder at the spectacle. He does well not to become distracted from his world-saving duties.

Further light trickery is in evidence where the platforms are concerned. Again, they're composed of gradients rather than blocks of homogeneous colour, some darker than others to

give the impression that light is being shone from a particular source. On the far side, the colours are at their darkest where the cast shadows would fall.

Few people seem to notice that Dynamo himself adapts to match the colour scheme of his environment much like a chameleon. It doesn't make a whole lot of sense, but it's a clever touch all the same. I doubt that's something that came about by accident.



"What a lovely surprise. After CJ in the USA, Spike in Transylvania et al, it's so refreshing to actually see a good Codies game which is playable, tricky, different and an altogether not-budgety-at-all kind of game. The smart and fast vertical scrolling effectively provides another obstacle because you can't see what's coming next. A minor problem is that the cute sprites don't fit in with the damply atmospheric backgrounds - or is it the other way around? A major problem is that the game is harshly unforgiving of mistakes - there are no credits and a

dearth of restart points, so you usually end up going back a long, long way. Mildly stonking."

ST Format (76%, November 1992)

"As a budget release this could be one for that wet Wednesday afternoon if you've got absolutely nothing to do. However, perhaps because I've seen this type of game done so much better, I found it rather tired and dated."

CU Amiga (42%, November 1992)

"Captain Dud would possibly be a better name for this sub-standard platformer. The usual cliched plot involves arch-fiend Austen Von Flyswatter, who has stolen the world's largest diamond collection."

CU Amiga (42%, November 1992)

"The graphics in Captain Dynamo are superb. Some full-price titles don't achieve the visual appearance of this game. Soundwise, this could have done with the option to have spot effects instead of a tune. As it is, the music isn't all that bad. This is a very playable and enjoyable romp. If you have eight quid in your pocket, you should purchase this immediately!"

Amiga Action (80%, October 1992)

In spite of its gameplay limitations and mixed reception upon release, Captain Dynamo was a very popular game. Between November 1992 and July 1993 it featured in the retail sales charts six times, reaching its top rank of no. 4 in the budget section in November. No doubt a testament to the level of care and attention dedicated to its production by a tiny three man team.

"A fun, challenging, tongue-in-cheek-'em-up that at less than a tenner makes a lot more expensive software look daft."

Amiga Computing (76%, December 1992)

As reported by Game's That Weren't there was to be a follow up to Captain Dynamo for the Commodore 64, though it failed to materialise owing to Codemasters' abandonment of the waning platform.

A late-stage playable preview is available from the same site. To find out if an Amiga iteration was also in the works I asked the coder of the original 16-bit incarnation, Derek Leigh-Gilchrist. While he personally wasn't commissioned to develop one, he *was* in the process of devising a Captain Dynamo sequel for the Mega Drive/Genesis when Codemasters pulled the plug. Also due to the decline of the system's commercial potential.

Derek tells me that he still has a prototype stashed away somewhere in his loft and will see if he can root it out at some point so we can see what might have been. There's life in the old bat yet!